



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE PLACE OF HENLEY

BY MARIETTA NEFF

WILLIAM ERNEST HENLEY, whose prose studies of literary men were interpretative and shot with jewelled lights, like Hazlitt's, would have hated the academic colorlessness of criticism too much taken up with the computing of influences. Yet it is in terms of other men and other work that those who have written about Henley and his verse have persistently expressed their views.

Those who knew Henley and those who are acquainted with his work have been wont to find in him physical and temperamental, as well as poetical, affinities with many other persons strangely different from one another. In body, he was a "Baresark, a modern Viking," a second Samuel Johnson, notable alike for native vigor and for suffering—an image, as in the Rodin bust, of the divine Pan. In relation to his coterie of colleagues and disciples, he was to one an English counterpart of the demi-god Hugo; to another, "a cheerful Socrates of a somewhat noisy Academe," "a genial Cato who gave his little senate laws"; and to a third, captain—not of his own soul, but of a newspaper staff. In his spiritual quality, he suggests to one writer now Heine and again Rabelais; to a second, he is merely a frank pagan; to a third, a kind of inverted Puritan. In the search for literary analogies or influences, there has been an inclination to extract from Henley's critical prose the names of those whom he delighted to honor with the essayist's seal of interest or approval. Henley's biographer, Mr. Cornford goes to the other extreme, and insists that Henley was not an imitator but a rebel. Yet the disciple, however eager to defend the master's originality, admits that it was not dissociated from a high degree of literary sophistication—a fact sufficiently obvious. Its significance lies in Henley's having been credited with a new poetry. One

would like to know, then, what effect other poets, English or foreign, had upon Henley's theory of art, upon the prosody and diction of his rhymes and rhythms, and upon the choice and treatment of his few impassioned themes—his cult of the river, the city, the sea, and his worship of love and death.

Though Henley's *Essays and Views and Reviews* seem responsible for the discovery of too many temperamental analogies and literary influences, the opinions avowed in these essays reveal with delightful immediacy Henley's reactions toward literature and art. The process of selection and revision by which some of the papers were recovered from "the shot rubbish of journalism" has not robbed them of their unstudied charm.

Here are some illuminating judgments. Henley thought nothing more exquisite than the best of Herrick. He felt that at times the epic mockery of *Don Juan* was to the full as beneficial as the chaste philosophy of *The Excursion* and the *Ode to Duty*. Part of the time, at least, he detested Shelley, and he looked with an unfriendly eye upon Landor. He believed that, for the sake of color, Rossetti had created in the name of poetry an inorganic complex of phrases and suggestions. Heine he admired for the sensuous loveliness of his verse and its seemingly artless grace. The poet in Hugo he praised for craftsmanship of "the rare, immortal type"; but Hugo, the man, he called a "bounder," and accused of a sentimental "*rastaq*" that made it hard for decent people to endure him. Both Meredith and Browning he condemned for obscurity, and the latter for the worse fault of being what he was pleased to term an "Inexhaustible Bottle." Banville he liked for a nice regard for the human as well as the æsthetic values; and, somewhat from the same point of view, he linked together, a little oddly, the names of Dobson, Patmore, and Arnold, as those who, alone among modern English poets, stood upon the classic "ancient way which is the best." Yet, in another passage, he wrote of Arnold:

There is little of that delight in material for material's sake which is held to be essential to the composition of a great artist; there is none of that rapture of sound and motion, and none of that efflorescence of expression which are deemed inseparable from the endowment of the true singer.

Henley liked Arnold most, however, when he thought him least modern, as in the unrhymed *Philomela* and

Balder. Milton and Tennyson he preferred, too, in their later work, when they seemed to him no less impatient of rhyme than confident in rhythm. If all these and other opinions expressed in *Views and Reviews* reveal a somewhat personal and wayward method of judging poetry, they do not preclude the making of sound inferences. They show clearly that Henley was much concerned with the form of poetry, and that he hated cordially the vices of coldness, didacticism, and sentimentality.

Henley's theory of art is, in general, in accord with his view of poetry. He is sensitive to technical excellence in painting, and hostile to sentimentality in subject or treatment. In spite of certain mannerisms in his own poetry, he seems to have been rather unsympathetic toward the romantic confusion of the arts. He compared Monticelli's painting, with its "orchestral explosions of color," to the verse that one reads for the sound's sake only—for everything but meaning. He was sure that painting was something more than dabbling exquisitely with material, and, at the same time, equally sure that it was not at all disguised literature. He would have agreed with Whistler that painting was not concerned with emotions growing out of religion, patriotism, or human relationships, and that it saw and expressed all things in terms of line and color and paint. He subscribed to the doctrine of *The Ten O'Clock* and *The Red Rag*, and yet he asserted furiously that he never "babbled the Art-for-Art's-sake babble."

Perhaps this curious welter of opinions about literature and art merely expresses a temperament to which philosophy was "like chalk in the mouth," or perhaps it indicates what is but natural in one who, himself essentially a Romanticist, began his career somewhat under the influence of the *Parnasse contemporain*. Since the Symbolist reaction has thrown the Parnassians into disrepute, it is only just to admit that, although in the beginning they looked to LeConte de Lisle, Vanville, Gautier, and Baudelaire as their masters, they did not think of themselves as a school, and did not intend to limit the boundaries of the vast domain that Victor Hugo had won for poetry. They meant their *Parnasse contemporain*, *recueil de vers nouveaux*, to be for poetry what the annual salon was for painting. They insisted upon religious devotion to form, but they did not demand any unity of theory or tendency. Yet in their work,

or that of men at one time or another associated with them—from Gautier and Baudelaire to Mallarmé and Verlaine—Henley discovered many characteristics with which he must have felt himself in accord. How much sympathy he found there for the work of foreign artists, how much enthusiasm for the spirit and methods of modern painting, how much distaste for long narrative and philosophic poems, how acute a perception of the goodness and the monstrosity of cities! And how much preoccupation with the lyric treatment of elemental themes—love and death and the affinities between man and nature! For this catholicity of spirit, the Parnassians and all succeeding Romanticists found warrant in Victor Hugo. All schools, they held, derived from him, existed in him, returned unto him. He, the priest and prophet of society, he, who scorned the idle singer, condescended, at the same time, to be the perfect artist. His disciples were intoxicated with the conviction that he had won for them all subjects from the most grandiose to the meanest, from the most picturesquely objective to the most intimately perverse, and all words, all melodies—indeed, all the secrets of craftsmanship.

Henley, as he read French literature, felt himself, also, splendidly free. Except, however, when he wrote in artificial, old French lyric forms, his prosody—though it became so relaxed that his later poems read at times almost like measured-off prose—seems to be thoroughly English. Gautier, Baudelaire, and LeConte de Lisle were precisians in regard to the laws of verse. In 1873-5, while the poet of *Romances sans Paroles* and *Sagesse* was meditating in his prison cell upon the strange metrical theories of Arthur Rimbaud, Henley, in the Old Edinburgh Infirmary, was already composing rhymeless verse in meters not unknown to English poetry. At all times he was attracted by the descending rhythm and short lines, if the hemistichs be printed separately, of the native, unrhymed verse, and of modern English imitations of old Teutonic types. Now and again, through his poems, one hears echoes of *Hiawatha* and the *Saga of King Olaf* and *Merlin and the Gleam*. But the trochaic-dactylic rhythm appears not only to be suited to the imitation of primitive verse-forms, but also, often with the ornament of alliteration or assonance, to compensate in some measure for rhymelessness. The unrhymed poems of Matthew Arnold, particularly those in the elegiac

mood, abundantly illustrate this fact. Henley's irregular rhythms, like many of Arnold's also, and like much recent free verse, are often iambics, broken into lines of varying length, and tending to run into cadenced prose. There is nothing metrically new about either these unrhymed rhythms or the rhymed, irregular lyric forms, for which there is abundant precedent all the way from Milton and Cowley to Arnold, Patmore, and even Tennyson. The fact that Henley never, like so many poets of the present time, entirely relinquishes metrical pattern, and that he neither employs the syntax of prose nor abandons the syntax and punctuation of the sentence in favor of cadences or phrasal or clausal groups of images, as units of expression, is further proof of his fealty to custom. It is clear, too, that, although he is not given to inverting the order of subject, predicate, and object, he is profoundly influenced by the Miltonic period, with its multiple suspensions and its cumulative rhythm. Henley's prosodic peculiarities are evidently, then, to be associated with the practice of accepted English poets, rather than with that of the French Symbolists and their disciples at home and abroad.

Henley's diction, rather than his prosody, seems to have been not unaffected by tendencies deriving, in the first place, from Victor Hugo. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the literature of England, as well as of France, was characterized by a peculiar type of preciosity. Dictionary-hunting was sanctioned by the precept or the example of Gautier or Baudelaire or the Symbolists. Solecism and barbarism and old words employed in a way that gave them unfamiliar charm suggested the upsurging of fresh emotion, and the happy alliance between youthful vigor and beauty that is timeless.

Henley employs a diction that is, in part, the result of deliberate attention to theory, and, in part, the unconscious product of his reading. He is not afraid of a Miltonic allusion to Thrones and Powers and Dominations, for example. He does not disdain familiar line-patterns, like

Unravined, imperturbable, unsubdued

or

O Death! O Change! O Time!

He does not object to appropriating a phrase: "ungirt loins and lamps unlit"; "we'll go no more a-roving"; "over

the hills and far away." Like most poets, he has favorite modes of grouping words. He is fond of placing a sonorous polysyllable between monosyllables, as in "to some immitigable end," "sweet, inscrutable eyes," "the old, indissoluble peace." On the whole, Henley uses mouth-filling epithets a little prodigally and uncertainly, like Whitman, not confidently, like Milton. For some reason psychically significant, no doubt, he returns caressingly to "sleep" and "death" and "peace" and "dream." He flings a challenge to squeamishness in the repetition of words like "lewd," "wanton," "lust," "unclean," "shameless," or "obscene." This idiosyncrasy is less an indication of personal robustness (though Henley did not share even Stevenson's dubiety about the orgiastic foundations of life) than of a dislike of cant and sentimentality. Then, too, theory as to the nature of the poetic vocabulary is partly accountable for this species of daring, as well as for the liberal use of many an expression as informal as "perks it," "batch of boats," "the black job of burking London town," "shed my duds," or for an indifference like that of the young Keats toward the established forms and functions of words. In still more interesting ways, Henley expressed his modernity. In spite of his distaste for certain aspects of the romantic confusion of the arts, he could strike out a hard, clear, painter's image, like "poplars black in the wake of the setting moon"; and he was sufficiently attracted by the æsthetics of Baudelaire to let perfume, sound, and color melt into one another in "visual orchestra," a "voice of living light," "visible music," or "odorous music." Again, when he chose the titles for his *London Voluntaries*, he had in mind the theory or the practice of Baudelaire or Gautier, or, more probably, the example of Whistler, who had long been composing, in line and color, his "symphonies" and "variations" and "nocturnes."

Henley's poems of the world's great City have more in common with the spirit of Whistler's Thames etchings or nocturnes, or Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*, than with the democratic hurly-burly of Whitman's dithyrambs in praise of Mannahatta. Henley does, to be sure, shout a little barbarically his delight in the "lewd, perennial, overmastering spell" cast by imperious Pan upon the responsive city, but he is touched, as Whitman is not, by the decadent poet's awareness of the correspondence between the spirit

of the night and our own tainted souls. At night, the oozing river slime, the stagnant vapors of the sky, the evil glimpses of the moon, disclose their secret affinity with the hideousness of cities. But Henley is too healthy of mind to do more than hint, in passing, at what lies in shameful occultation. More typically, he is an artist, etching portraits of London types, or joyously painting the seasonal color moods, physical and spiritual, of the city at night, at twilight, and at dawn. These are wizard hours, when, in a double sense, the hues of day grow dusk and silver, chrysoprase, sapphirine, and rosy gold.

Even if Henley had not read all the sea poets, those to whom the ocean was a confidant, and those to whom it was a place of mariners and ships, he would surely have been no more a poet of London and the Thames than of the sea. For, from childhood, he knew the irresistible lure of it, as it came up the Severn to Gloucester, bringing "the scents of the World's End." Unlike Whitman, he did not discover in the sea the source of an emotion primarily sexual, or of a mystical, concomitant yearning for death. He wrote no sea poetry like *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, or the conclusion of *Passage to India*. But in *Rhymes and Rhythms* iii, x, xiv, xvi, and xx, and in other poems, he approached the sea in many moods. Somewhat in the spirit of Heine's *Die Nacht am Strande*, he endowed it with a huge, grotesque personality, naming it Old Indefatigable and Ancient of Days. He beheld it as a horrible accomplice of the leering Moon. He shrank from its unfriendliness; he longed for its brotherly unrest; he saw it glow with the "strange-hued blazonings of dawn"; in roaring hours of wind and wave, in the lapping of weak surges, and in immemorial obedience to law, he found symbols of vitality and decay and fate.

Aside from the fact that they celebrate chiefly the passion of the flesh, Henley's love lyrics are much more conventional than his poems of the sea. They possess a frankly sensual gust, but no strange savour of erotic mysticism. Whatever uniqueness they have lies in their blending of styles or attitudes. There is, in many of them (as in Heine's songs) a slightly wearisome devotion to April, May, and June, the nightingale and the rose. There is somewhat of Whitman's abandon to bodily ardors, kindled

at primordial fires. There is a touch of Coventry Patmore's less intoxicated lyricism, the music of fireside intimacies, still dear, but not untamed. There are the themes bequeathed by Roman elegiasts to post-Elizabethan singers. But there is more dread of the time when desire shall fail than of the day when man goeth to his long home; for it was with senses still keen and the battle spirit shouting in his blood that Henley wanted to be flung into death. In the later poems there is an almost heart-breaking insistence upon the fact that it is time to creep in close about the fire, and tell gray tales, and dream old dreams. In the end, the lovers are but

two ghosts Omnipotence
Can touch no more . . . no more!

But Henley's poetry does much more than continue the lyric tradition of the cult of love and death. His songs of love may be melodies rather primitive, or a bit commonplace, blown on pipes pandean, but his songs of death all but exhaust "the exquisite chromatics of decay." In them there is terror touched with mirth—an expression of the mind that could understand Thomas Hood's genius for the macabre, and quote approvingly Champfleury's saying, "*Tout ce qui touche à la mort est d'une gaieté folle.*" There are curious suggestions—reminiscences, one is tempted to say—of the grotesquerie of Gautier's *La Comédie de la mort*. There is the exalted calm of Whitman's *Whispers of Heavenly Death*. Indeed, Henley's poetry is almost never unhaunted by some image of the end of every man's desire: the Ancient Enemy, the Terror, the gray Henchman of Destiny, the Ragpicker, the Pandar, the old Nurse, the Comforter, the great Deliverer—Death, the twin minister with Life of the unoriginal Will—death, like life in Rabelais' view, preposterous and sublime.

It is to Henley's advantage that he concerns himself so much, even in the midst of a familiar urban setting, with these ancient, basic themes, and that he expresses modern psychic states in terms of the processional moods of unchanging nature. It can not be charged against him, as against some poets of the new age of romantic realism, that he is too much occupied with what is trivial or ephemeral or perverse, especially in the life of cities. One feels that, on the whole, in spite of his colloquialisms and his unrhymed rhythms, Henley is least startling in diction and

prosody and, in his really individual work, most modern in his choice of subject—that he recognizes poetry in the imaginative aspects of the most varied forms of experience. He is what the seventeenth century would have called a Janus-faced poet: he is at peace with the past, but he is enamoured of sincerity, ready to do battle for a man's right to his personal sense of life and art. For him, one door of the temple is shut, and the other open. Occasional echoes of him in poetry of the moment are not significant; but the independence and the sanity that were his, still function in the catholic spirit of the most richly endowed and the most sincerely self-disciplined poets of to-day.

MARIETTA NEFF.